

ON DEMYTHOLOGIZING PHILOSOPHY

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Not infrequently one hears the remark that professional philosophers today spend too much time quibbling about words or even just nonsense instead of dealing with real life issues. To this I want to address the following paper, agreeing, in part, with that remark, and disagreeing also in part. For I want to plead for elimination of several pseudo-problems brought up over and over in philosophical books and articles, especially in introductory textbooks. In other words, I am making a plea to demythologize philosophy.

In a very recent issue of *Philosophic Research and Analysis*, Professor Alfred K. Aldin makes a plea to clarify some philosophical fundamentals.¹ It's a worthwhile attempt, but not enough. What is really needed is to eliminate the myths that have grown up in philosophy. Just as the effort to demythologize professional theology opened the way to fruitful new insights for exegesis and speculation, so, I am convinced, an attempt to eliminate the myths posed by philosophers can lead to constructive clarifications in genuine philosophical queries. As time permits, I propose to examine six of these pseudo-problems, i.e., these myths, found in contemporary philosophy.

The first one I wish to discuss was already named a myth over thirty years ago. Gilbert Ryle called it the "myth of the given."² He categorized as illogical the theory of sense data, in a work that attempted to demythologize "mind" and "will" as substances. I want to discuss more fully that myth of the given because some try to substitute other "givens" as what is primordially known by us, whether they call them ideas, sense impressions, presentations, pure experience, raw data, or just perceptions, sensations, and so on.

Instead, I insist that what is primordially *given* to human cognition is an awareness of "something *existing*," of "*be-ing* going on," of an "*exist-er*" present. Not only is the work of psychologists supportive here, but everyone can verify this for himself or herself upon reflection. Psychologists, as you know, demonstrate that operation of our sensory powers is minimally a natural behavior and mostly a learned procedure. Humans have to learn to perceive even in such basic behaviors as seeing distinct colors, hearing distinct sounds, and so on. Parents have to teach their children not only the names for colors, but even to discriminate between colors. Many a child comes to kindergarten lacking not only the names of colors like red versus purple, but even unable to perceive the difference until taught. So for shapes and sounds and textures.

However, while we appreciate the contributions of psychologists, the more important factor here for a philosophical examination is the basic

rational reflection which can be performed by everyone. It is this: that the first knowledge-awareness we have is that there *is* something one is seeing, that there *is* something one is touching, that there *is* something one is hearing, and so forth. One can be quite *uncertain* in identifying a visual perception, but one is *certain* of seeing something *being* there. One can be quite unsure of ascertaining the kind of touch, but one is sure of touching an *existing* something or other. One can be at a loss in identifying the sound but still be convinced that there *is* something making the sound.

To put it directly: our primordial, immediate knowledge is of be-ing, of existing, of an "is-er." Then, secondarily, there follows our attempt to identify that "exist-er" according to our various learned patterns of sensations and perceptions, which is a secondary, mediate knowledge. For example, I see something—an "exister"—in the corner of the room. Then I go over to take a closer look, and maybe to feel it, and only then identify it as a blue, soft, small, woolen mitten. To repeat, we first are aware that there is an "exister," and only secondarily identify it as a *kind* of being, according to learned patterns of perception, conception, etc. We do not first have perceptions and then conclude to an object causing, or behind, those perceptions. We first know an existing object and then apply our learned perceptions and conceptions to it.

Thus, "the given" is a myth in philosophy whenever that given is said to be any manner of perception, or conception, or idea, or sense datum. However, "the given" is not a myth when that given is recognized as our primary, immediate, cognitional awareness of "existing" going on. This primordial, immediate awareness is not, of course, the sophisticated, reflective knowledge of being *qua* being which is the subject matter of metaphysics. Rather, it is the direct, universal, awareness that something *is*.

Turning now to the benefit of this demythologizing of the given, it is apparent that metaphysics if fully re-instated, both in importance in philosophy and foundational to its other areas, I refer, of course, to a metaphysics of being, of existing, not to a metaphysics of transcendental categories, or of substance, or of essence, or of phenomena, or of clear ideas, or of phenomenology. These latter, i.e., categories, concepts, phenomena, perceptions are all learned; they are not natural givens. Only "*be-ing*" is a natural given.

Nor is one's own existence, or one's self, the primordial natural *given* to cognition. This is contrary to fact that a philosopher who holds it is liable to ridicule, especially by contemporary social and behavioral scientists.³ Infants are first aware of "something," but not of themselves. An infant will bite its own finger, howling all the while, but not realizing the finger is its own. In fact, it takes a while, several months, for the infant to become aware of parts of its own body. But the infant is immediately aware of a "something" which is causing the pain, or satisfying its hunger. Only later,

perhaps by two or three years of age, has the child learned to be aware of its *self*. And it is only in the beginning of maturity when we reflect upon our actions and behavior that we begin to know what kind of a self we are. And this is frequently not well understood even by quite old adults. They still do not know their *self*! No, the self is not the primordial given to human cognition; the existing of other objects, other "exist-ers," is what is first known.

The second myth in philosophy that I want to discuss is that of calling causality a mental relation and not a real relation. We all recognize this famous, or infamous, dictum of David Hume, which jolted Immanuel Kant from his dogmatic slumber, and led Kant to place causality as an a priori category of the mind. For the demythologizing here, there is first, of course, a simple reduction to absurdity. For if causality is not a real relation, then, the work of scientists looking for, e.g., the cause of cancer, is a lot of nonsense and a waste of huge sums of money, and those scientists would have to be labeled nitwits. As you know, most scientists do recognize this danger and defend their efforts in their philosophies of science. The same reduction to absurdity would hold for judges and lawyers attempting to prove who committed the crime, for cooks who combine ingredients for healthful food, and for children to be really related to the parents who genetically and gestationally begot them.

But a more serious philosophical analysis of the causal relation demonstrates that it is a real one and not just a mental one. It is this: If the causal relation between agent and effect were only mental, then, an agent could be so only if a mind were present to affirm this. Again, if the causal relation between agent and effect were only established mentally, then nothing would happen unless a mind were present to grasp this. All of which is patently false! Natural causal agents act, behave, perform, and so on, whether or not any mental being is around to witness them, and effects take place regardless of any observers. Thus, to base the relation between cause and effect on its being mentally affirmed is a myth. Causes are really related to their effects, and effects are really related to their causes. The relation is really *in* them, and humans have to *learn* to recognize that there *is* this relation, and wherein it is to be found. Real or mental relationships, whether causal or otherwise, are not a priori concepts; they are learned. And they are frequently learned the hard way, by making mistakes in assessing proper causes for effects, or in establishing numerical values or even whole set systems in mathematics, or in determining logical systems for validity and for truth and falsity.

This is not to deny that some relations are only mental. Much of mathematics, for example, especially the advanced kind, is constructed of purely mental relations. But my concern is with abolishing the myth which holds that *all* relations are *only* mental. And, having noted the reality of the

causal relation, it is now possible to ask whether some other relations are also real, and whether their recognition could solve some other philosophical problems—or pseudo-problems! I propose now to discuss a third myth, that of the “indefinability of the good” with its twin myth of the “irreducibility of ‘ought’ to ‘is.’”

The reader will recognize G. E. Moore’s famous problem about the impossibility of defining the good. And, I think, it is universally agreed that he noted, correctly, that good cannot be identified with any natural quality, nor, I would add, with any substance, essence, form, subsistent being, and so on. We are probably also agreed that his designation for this as a “naturalistic fallacy” is better named a “definist fallacy.” Even Aristotle’s classical definition, “the good is *that which* all things tend to,” cannot escape designation as a definist fallacy since he identifies good with a substantive. But we avoid this fallacy when we define the good as the *relation* between a potency and that which will actuate it. Another way of saying it is the good is the *relation* between a need and that which will fulfill the need. For example, for someone who is hungry, we say, “Food is good for that need,” by which we are designating the real *relation* in the food to appease the hunger. Likewise, we might say that arsenic is not good for the hungry person because arsenic does not have the relation to fulfill the need for food. Yes, the good cannot be identified with any substantive, but the good can be identified with a real relation between any potentiality and its actuation. The good is not the actuation; the good is not the potentiality; the good is the relation between them. Thus, the “indefinability of the good” is a myth in philosophy if applied universally and without qualification, because the good can be defined. The good is the *relation* between any potency and its actuation.

Its twin, the irreducibility of ‘ought’ to ‘is,’ is also a myth, and is the fourth one I want to discuss next. It follows closely upon the clarification of the good as a relation. For, just as the good is the relation between a need and what can fulfill that need, so “ought” is the relation between the agent, or causal action, and the fulfillment which it can bring about. For example, to the person who is hungry, we would say, “You *ought* to eat something.” This *ought* names the relation between the causal action of eating and the cessation of hunger. It is a real relation! Moreover, if the person is very hungry, we might add, “You *ought* to eat protein; it’s *good* for you.” In this case we would be designating two relations: *ought* signifies the relation of the agency of eating to fulfilling appetite, and *good* signifies the relation of need for nutrients in the body to protein which would fulfill that need. And, again as in the case of “the good,” so “ought” is not a substantive; it is the *relation* between some being and/or action and the fulfillment or actuation it can bring about. And, in both cases, these are real relations, even though we may make mistakes in discovering just where these real

relations are to be found. The discovery of these real relations is what science and philosophy genuinely attempt to do, is it not?

The trouble, of course, is that relationships, real *or* mental, are not empirically verifiable as such. And any philosopher, limited by a logical positivist and/or naturalist point of view, is at a loss to discuss real relations. Or, rather, it’s the other way around, is it not? Logical positivists and naturalists do not admit the reality of something called “mind.” For them, there can be no such thing as a purely “mental” relation. For them, there can be only real relations; otherwise they contradict themselves! Again, we are confronted with the absurdity of saying that all relations, especially the causal relation, are only “mental.” And let us avoid the other myths of the “indefinability of the good” and the “irreducibility of ‘ought’ to ‘is,’” for both are real relations, and their discovery, like that of the causal relation, is the valid work of both scientists and philosophers.

On the other hand, let me point out a relation that is not a real one, but only a mental one. This relation is frequently proposed as a philosophical task of *discovery*. It is the “search for meaning.” It is proposed as a task of discovery but is, instead, a task of *construction*. For, meaning is a relation between a symbol, or symbol system, and that of which it is the symbol. For example, the word “dog” is related to that object out there, barking and wagging his tail, for the word “dog” is a symbol we use to think about and to talk about that object. So, if someone asks, what is the meaning of “dog,” “meaning” designates the relation between the symbol and the dog; it does not designate the object, the dog. If it did, we could not answer the question, “What is the meaning of *le chien*?” by saying “dog”; we would have to point to the object. No, meaning is the *relation* between the symbol we have constructed and that of which it is the symbol, and sometimes “meaning” is the relation between one symbol we have constructed and another symbol we have constructed.

The *process* of construction is real; this is why we say that such and such has “meaning” for someone. But the symbol, and symbol system, are not real; they are only constructions. And the relation between them, i.e., the relation between the symbolic construct and that of which it is the symbolization, is only as adequate as is the symbol to represent the real object or world. Thus, it would be more proper for us in philosophy to speak of “constructing the meaning of one’s life,” or of “constructing the meaning of the universe” than to talk about “finding the meaning of life,” or of “discovering the meaning of the universe.” This myth, that of “discovering the meaning” of something is not so prominent in philosophical works; it is, nonetheless, misleading, for it prompts people to conclude they have failed in life because they have not found its meaning. Rather, everyone has the task of constructing the meaning of their life, for it requires the formation of a philosophical or religious or scientific, etc., symbol *system*. The

compatible set of relations, this set of meanings, gives one an understanding of world and self. For, just as meaning is the relation between a symbol and that of which it is the sign, so understanding is the intellectual grasping of that relation, or set of relations.

Let us then, desist from speaking of "discovering meaning"; it is a myth, and it is a myth in reverse of the other relations I discussed previously. For, whereas the other three relations are real, i.e., causal, good, ought, "meaning" is not. It is mental. For, human beings construct meaning, since it is the human mode of intellection to conceive symbolic representations (a concept) to stand in lieu, mentally, of our myriad experiences of objects and of ourselves. These symbolic representations are that by which we deal with our environment. The relation of the symbol to that object of which it is the symbol is also a mental construction, as is the symbol. This relation, this "meaning," is mental; it is not a real relation, although the process of constructing concepts is real and so is the process of understanding a real process.

I turn now to my sixth and last myth. It is that of the supposed impossibility for a theist to propose a criterion of falsifiability concerning the existence of a creator God. You recall this challenge flung at theists by Anthony Flew when he concluded an article with "I therefore put to the succeeding symposiasts the simple central questions, 'What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of God?'"⁴

The burden of the article was negative, that is, it assumed that no theist could answer the question. As a matter of fact, I have not found anyone else answering the question directly. But I am sure of at least one answer. It is as follows: If anyone were to succeed in making something to exist without using any previously existing materials or energy to do so, this would falsify the theist position that God, and God alone, creates all things 'out of nothing.'

It is a fundamental position for the philosophical theist that to give being, existence, to things is precisely what is meant by naming the Supreme Being, a creator God. It is also fundamental to those who uphold the tenets of the world monotheist religions. Thus, if any being, which is not God, were to perform an act of creating something, it would falsify the position that the existence of everything depends on a creator, a Supreme Being, God.

Consequently, it is a myth to state that theists have no hypothesis to propose which could constitute a falsification of the tenet that there is a God. There is such a falsifiability principle. It is this: If anything not God, were ever to create, in the strict sense of the term of "making to be," without employing any previously existing being, then it would prove that there is no Creator God.

In conclusion, I make my plea once again, for all of us to eliminate at least these six myths from any further propagation in our philosophical works.⁵ It will make us appear less foolish to many people. It will also enable us to deal more forcefully with that noblest of philosophical tasks—that of real life issues. It may even restore to us the dignity which should be ours: "lovers of wisdom."

NOTES

1. Alfred K. Aldin, "Clarifying Some Philosophical Fundamentals." *Philosophic Research and Analysis*, 8 (Early Fall, 1980), pp. 2-4.

2. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), p. 238. Actually, he stated, "When the sabbatical notion of 'the given' has given place to the week-day notion of 'the ascertained,' we shall have bade farewell to both Phenomenalism and the Sense Datum Theory." The book, of course, was devoted to dispelling several myths, as that of "the myth of the mind as a ghost in a machine" of "the myth of volitions," etc. Earlier, Winston H. F. Barnes had called it "The Myth of Sense-Data." 45, 1944-45.

3. Cf., Edith Jacobson, M.D., *The Self and the Object World*, (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1964). "Moreover, human beings achieve full physical and mental maturity, ego and superego autonomy, instinctual and emotional mastery and freedom only after adolescence" (p. 31). Note, also, the involved sophisticated procedure needed by Roderick Chisholm, in his *Person and Object: A Metaphysical Study*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1976), to prove the possibility of a direct awareness of the self—after one is philosophically mature!

4. Anthony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," from *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. by Anthony Flew and Aladair MacIntyre. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), p.55.

5. There are, of course, other myths which need to be eliminated. Among them, to mention but a few: (1) I agree with Ryle that mind and will are not substances; they are actions, and/or capacities for acting. (2) Another myth is that of speaking of "freedom of the will." The will itself is not free, but choices can be free, i.e., humans have freedom to make choices, or humans can make free choices. (3) Likewise, I would note that matter is not a being; instead, some beings have characteristics we have learned to name "material." "Matter" is only an abstract concept.